

BRIEF ARTICLES AND NOTES

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Johnson could not have been pleased with Chesterfield for acting the muse to such a work, and he was probably less pleased with Cambridge. "Of Cambridge," Bowles reports concerning Johnson, "I thought he spoke with indifference, & of his Intruder w<sup>ch</sup> I once red [sic] to him he said it was not happy."<sup>9</sup> Of course Johnson's estimate may be based on Cambridge's genuine mediocrity; but it may also be based on his reaction to *The World*, no. 102, particularly since (in addition to the letter to Chesterfield) Johnson had already demonstrated extreme sensitivity to misguided views of his Preface and *Dictionary*. In the *Journal britannique* for July-August, 1755, Dr. Matthew Maty attacked Johnson's style for being too labored, the *Dictionary* for not adequately inculcating religion and the political wisdom inherent in the present Administration, and the Preface for not paying proper homage to Chesterfield.<sup>10</sup> When Maty was nominated as a possible aide for a journal Johnson was then contemplating, Johnson replied: "the little black dog! I'd throw him into the Thames."<sup>11</sup> Johnson could not speak—or write—that way to one of the most important men in the kingdom; but he could suggest, in a firm but polite letter, that the contents and values of Chesterfield's papers were unacceptable; and he could remember that a dubious talent like Cambridge shared and helped to propagate those values and, accordingly, deserved to be spoken of "with indifference."

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Tristram as Critic: Momus's Glass vs. Hobby-Horse

In the first volume of *Tristram Shandy* Tristram announces to his readers that he will draw his uncle Toby's character from his "HOBBY-HORSE" rather than with any "mechanical help" such as wind instruments, evacuations, the Pentagraph, or the "Camera."<sup>1</sup> The most fully considered of these mechanical means of characterization is the Momus's glass, a curious device which had been employed in a prose work the year before *Tristram Shandy* appeared.

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<sup>9</sup> *Life*, iv, 523.

<sup>10</sup> *Life*, i, 284. For relevant portions of Maty's remarks, see A. de Morgan, "Dr. Johnson and Dr. Maty," *N&Q*, 2nd series, (1857) iv, 341.

<sup>11</sup> *Life*, i, 284.

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<sup>1</sup> Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. James A. Work (New York, 1940), pp. 74-77. Subsequent quotation is from this edition.

Tristram's comments on the Momus's glass in Chapter 23 of Volume I seem to be a specific criticism of *Chiron; or, The Mental Optician*, a two-volume work published anonymously in 1758.<sup>2</sup>

The preface to *The Mental Optician* describes the method of characterization rejected by Tristram:

The very great Philosopher, who, from his heart wished that every man had a window to his heart, undoubtedly little foresaw, that in the year 1758, the improvements in perspective glasses, at present, would answer his most eager wishes. How needless his scheme would be now may appear from the following sheets, in which, thrice curious reader! we have no apprehension or fear of your dis-belief when they delineate your neighbor,—but only when they delineate yourself. (I, v-vi)

The author here refers to that "great Philosopher," Momus, the Greek god of criticism, ridicule, and censure; Momus expressed dissatisfaction with Hephaestus for not putting a window in the breast of the man he had made so that his secret thoughts could be revealed.<sup>3</sup> This anonymous writer accomplishes Momus's desire by having his "mental optician," Chiron, invent a telescope which enables him to see into every heart except, of course, his own. Each chapter of the work represents the daily observations of Chiron and his pupil, Achilles, from the tower of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Their observations are presented in the form of a dialogue in which the mentor reveals the "masquerade" below their point of vision. The result is a simple, often repetitive commentary on fifty London scenes, controlled by a rule that Chiron states: "When I give you the proper glass, to know the realities of things, you will perceive everything exactly contrary to what you, like the world in general, might suspect or imagine" (I, 16). The stock characters of eighteenth-century satire parade before the reader and turn out, mechanically, to be the opposite of what they seem.

Tristram surely has the simplicity of the earlier work in mind when he makes this assessment of the Momus's glass:

If the fixture of Momus's glass, in the human breast, according to the proposed emendation of that arch-critick, had taken place,—first, This foolish consequence would certainly have followed,—That the very wisest and the very

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<sup>2</sup> *Chiron; or, The Mental Optician* (London: Printed for J. Robinson, 1758). Andrew Block, in *The English Novel 1740-1850: A Catalogue Including Prose Romances, Short Stories, and Translations of Foreign Fiction* (London, Revised Edition, 1961), attributes the work to Charles Caraccioli, who, according to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, was the master of the grammar school at Arundel in 1766. *The Mental Optician* is available in the Singer-Mendenhall Collection of the Rare Book Collection of the University of Pennsylvania. Subsequent quotation is from this copy.

<sup>3</sup> *The New Century Classical Handbook*, ed. Catherine B. Avery (New York, 1962), p. 724.

gravest of us all, in one coin or other, must have paid window-money every day of our lives.

And secondly, That had the said glass been there set up, nothing more would have been wanting, in order to have taken a man's character, but to have taken a chair and gone softly, as you would to a dioptrical bee-hive, and look'd in,—view'd the soul stark naked;—observ'd all her motion,—her machinations;—traced all her maggots from their first engendering to their crawling forth;—watched her loose in her frisks, her gambols, her capricios; and after some notice of her more solemn deportment, consequent upon such frisks, &c.—then taken your pen and ink and set down nothing but what you had seen, and could have sworn to: —But this is an advantage not to be had by the biographer in this planet. (p. 74)

Characterization is a more difficult matter than the author of *The Mental Optician* would have it. The Momus's glass is too mechanical a device to realize the subtle recesses of the mind. As Tristram concludes in his remarks about this device: "Our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapt up here in a dark covering of uncrystalized flesh and blood" (p. 74).

The complexity of a human character can be more adequately rendered, Tristram feels, through the device of a hobby-horse, the ruling passion. The relation between a man and his hobby-horse is in "the manner of electrified bodies,—and that by means of the heated parts of the rider which come immediately into contact with the back of the HOBBY-HORSE" (p. 77). Tristram explains his method further:

By long journies and much friction it so happens that the body of the rider is at length fill'd as full of HOBBY-HORSICAL matter as it can hold; so that if you are able to give but a clear description of the nature of the one, you may form a pretty exact notion of the genius and character of the other. (p. 77)

Tristram seeks the nuances of character in the varying manifestations of a ruling passion.

Both the author of *The Mental Optician* and Laurence Sterne are trying to reveal the secret life of their characters, which is the special province of fiction. As Sterne's narrator-become-critic, Tristram, realizes, the method of characterization must have a plausibility and intricacy which are not found in mechanical conventions like the Momus's glass. The hobby-horse is a convention, too, but Tristram's device has a probability and complexity which make it distinctive.

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